

Fragments on/of Voice

Literature operates with voice, and voices--the voices of the author/poet, of the characters (and the poem's 'speaker'), and of the reciter and reader, who even in silent reading registers rhythms, inflections, gestures, through subvocalisation: an entire stereophony of prosodic and rhetorical expression. But literature also operates an extensive imaginary of voice. Voice is the 'stuff' of literature in two senses: its material support, and an abiding theme. And criticism itself involves so many 'voicings' of literary texts, as we test out the texts' possibilities, their reverberations, their potential afterlives.

Both voice and its imaginary are historically mutable, shaped by phenomena as various as the social function of poetry in predominantly, or exclusively, oral cultures, the class and race politics of accent, the technologies of sound recording, reproduction, transmission, and processing. And just as the imaginary of voice is shaped by the technologies and social circulation of voice and voices, so technologies and social circuit are possessed by the many imaginaries which have accreted over history. The voice that emerges from these imaginaries is plural, fragmented; to parse the imaginary of voice requires likewise that we think through fragments.

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William Blake's chimney sweeper from the 'Songs of Innocence' tells his tale:

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry "weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"¹

¹ William Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', W.H. Stevenson ed., *The Poems of Blake* (London: Longman, 1971), 68.

The infant's cry of "weep" both prefigures the call 'sweep' that will be his fate, and embodies the weeping of the motherless, abandoned child; likewise, 'tongue' figures both sound production and the articulate speech he does not yet have. His voice, at this moment, is both pre-linguistic and linguistic, or caught somewhere between the two.

Blake's tale of infant speech finds an echo in much later accounts of child language acquisition. The first cry of the newborn issues as the lungs first inflate with air, having been filled with fluid during pregnancy; but each subsequent cry serves as an initiation into vocal, and later verbal, communication. Guy Rosolato describes this process as the 'introjection of the "nutritive" voice, in the aura of the breast as primary object.'² The mouth is primarily the organ of breath and nutrition, and only later the organ of codified sound production; indeed, such sound production is designed to aid nutrition. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok chart a subsequent 'transition from a mouth filled with the breast to a mouth filled with words occurs by virtue of the intervening experiences of the empty mouth'.³ Words are a supplement to food, to the breast: a filling of oral emptiness, and at the same time the means of articulating desires beyond the nutritive. Such stories, moreover, replay the speculative histories of the origin of languages which abounded in the eighteenth century, whether based in onomatopoeia (as for Herder), or interjection (Condillac, Rousseau). In each instance, the first languages communicated through inflection, pitch, melody, rather than reference. As language becomes more 'articulate', so it becomes more monotone. Writes Rousseau: 'it becomes more precise and less passionate; it substitutes ideas for feelings, it no longer speaks to the heart, but to reason.'⁴

² Rosolato, 'La voix : entre corps et langage', in *La relation à l'inconnu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 37.

³ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 127.

⁴ Rousseau, 'Essay on the Origin of Languages, In Which Melody and Musical Imitation are Treated', *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* vol. 7, trans. and ed. John T. Scott (Hanover N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998), 289-332, 296.

Yet Blake's chimney sweeper does not simply attest to a movement from voice into language; the two are enmeshed. It is more like Michel de Certeau's suggestion that language originates in glossolalia--vocal inventions of speech. 'For the infant,' he argues, 'it is the voice that opens (and circumscribes) a sphere of communication preparatory to the spoken word... *a space of enunciation*': this space 'combines something prelinguistic, related to a silent origin or to the "attack" of the spoken word, and something postlinguistic, made from the excesses, the overflows, and the wastes of language.'⁵ Even when Blake's 'weep' has been incorporated into linguistic reference (in this case the polysemy of weeping and calling 'sweep' with a lisp), the sonorous performance remains, something more than language. It is more like babble in this regard: not an imitation of speech, but rather the infant testing out their vocal organs, at once, as Mladen Dolar notes, wholly solipsistic, and 'captured in a discourse.'⁶ Voice here seems both the origin to speech, and an excess irreducible back into speech. If, as Adriana Cavarero has argued, the history of metaphysics is one of the 'devocalisation of *logos*','⁷ then Blake points to a vocal residue that refuses to be erased, to be consigned to non-meaning. It's not simply that voices are extravagant--more than mere sound, but also more than mere speech. Rather, we might say: *voice is extravagance*.

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When the Muses were born, some men 'were ecstatic with pleasure, and were so busy singing that they didn't bother with food and drink, so that before they knew it they were dead.'⁸ This not the only moment in Western mythology at which vocal extravagance is not just hedonistic, but deathly. Pliny told of contests between

⁵ Michel de Certeau, 'Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias', 39, 33.

⁶ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 27.

⁷ Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 214.

⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus* trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 45. (Stephanus 259b).

nightingales which would continue until one of the competitors perish; in his *Ars Poetica* Johannes Aegidius de Zamora (1240–c.1316) adds one further myth: ‘The nightingale wastes little time in eating so that she can enjoy the beauty of her own song. Thus she dies sometimes from singing, and in dying sings’.⁹ Song interrupts the primary functions of mouth, larynx, lungs, diaphragm: communication, respiration, nutrition. Nutrition especially: song begets starvation. The mouth can sing, or it can eat; it cannot do both (don't sing with your mouth full).

However, the men in Socrates' tale are transformed into cicadas, ‘whom the Muses granted the gift of never needing any food once they were born; all they do is sing, from the moment of their births until their deaths, without eating or drinking’ (259c). This is not the first time cicadas have appeared in the *Phaedrus*: indeed, the very setting for the dialogue is characterised by how ‘the whisper of the breeze chimes in a summery, clear way with the chorus of the cicadas’ (230c). The voices of the cicadas lull Phaedrus and Socrates, but Socrates warns against dozing in the afternoon sun: ‘I think that as the cicadas sing and talk to one another in the heat about our heads, they look down on us as well’ (258e); if the two were to sleep ‘under their spell’, the cicadas would be in their rights to ‘laugh’ at them, but ‘if they see us talking and sailing past them as if they were Sirens whose spell we had resisted, they might perhaps be pleased enough to give us the gift which the gods have granted them the power to give people’ (259a-b).

The cicadas, emblems of deathly vocal excess, are now linked with another deathly emblem of voice: the Sirens. Whereas the cicadas had been ‘men’, who died singing at the behest of the female Muses; the image of the Sirens reverses this: woman singers leading men to their death. Socrates's myth--one of only two in Plato's entire

⁹ Cited in Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds*, 73. In an Appendix Leach provides a detailed comparison of Pliny's and Aegidius' accounts (301).

corpus, according to Perceval Frutiger, for which no earlier source exists¹⁰--both point to the excesses of voice, and to the containment of these excesses. If the Muses inspire such excess, it is also the Muses who subsequently regulate it, and channel it to good use: Socrates' and Phaedrus' philosophical dialogue, in homage to Urania, Muse of philosophers.

This tension between excess and containment is integral to vocal art more generally: song, after all, is a deployment of phonetic matter in accordance with harmonic, melodic, textural repertoires that formalise pitch, tempo, timbre. Whether it be Bach or Berio, Schubert or Schoenberg, aria or *Sprechgesang*: voice is both the *medium* of song, and mediated by song. Roland Barthes aimed to preserve the extravagance of voice by tying it to the corporeality of the individual (although not personal) voice's 'grain'. He searched out a sonic something 'there, manifest and stubborn (one hears only *that*), beyond (or before) the meaning of the words, their form..., the melisma, and even the style of execution.'¹¹ Barthes admired the baritone Charles Panzéra for giving sound to the opacities of language, giving sound to the production of voice itself, but lamented that this had become outmoded: singing teachers would prioritise 'breath' and 'clarity of meaning', and recording practices increased the bias for clarity (something that digital remastering has only served to intensify). For Barthes, the voice's 'grain' was a thing of the past; yet Socrates' myth implies that it already was: the Muses had contained it long ago.

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¹⁰ Perceval Frutiger, *Les Mythes de Platon* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1930), 233.

¹¹ Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in *Image-Music-Text*, 181.

In *Paradise Lost*, it was Urania to whom Milton turns as his 'Celestial Patroness'. It was she 'whose Voice divine / Following, above th'Olympian Hill I soar',¹² she who 'dictates to me slumbering, or inspires / Easy my unpremeditated Verse'.¹³ This is more than a figure for poetic inspiration. Urania was Muse not just of philosophers, but astronomy; Milton follows her 'Voice divine' not for poetic gift alone, but for understanding of the heavens.

Urania had been called the *Muse Celeste* by Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas in 1583. In this poem, Urania appears to Guillaume and describes her vocation as to endow 'quintessence to the soul and make the poet, / Surpassing himself, pour forth a high discourse / Which, divine, can prick up the ears of the deaf, / Animate rocks, and stop rivers.'¹⁴ Milton then further traces her theological origin:

for thou
Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top
Of old Olympus dwell'st, but Heav'nly borne,
Before the Hills appeared, or Fountain flowed,
Thou with Eternal Wisdom did converse,
Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play
In presence of th'Almighty Father, pleased
With thy Celestial Song.¹⁵

Milton's becomes the intersection of plural voices--the poet's and the Muse's, the Christian and the Classical, the individual poem's and the epic tradition's. It blends a voice shaped by versification with the narrative and didactic voices of the poem's dual

¹² John Milton, *Paradise Lost* ed. Alistair Fowler, (2nd ed., London: Longman, 1998), 388-389 (VII.2-3)

¹³ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 469 (IX.24-25).

¹⁴ Guillaume de Saluste du Bartas, 'Uranie, ou Muse Celeste', in *Commentaires et Annotations sur la Semaine de la création du monde* (Paris: Abel Langelier, 1583), 324-330, 325. 'Je quinte-essence l'âme et fais que le Poete / Surmontant soi-même, enfonce un haut discours / Qui, divin, par l'oreille attire les plus sourds / Anime les rochers, et les fleuves arrête.'

¹⁵ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 389-90 (VII.6-12).

'great Argument': the tale it recounts, and its immodest task to 'justify the ways of God to Men.'¹⁶ Indeed, Milton's ventriloquism is tied to the poem's apparently presumptuous aspiration: 'Standing on Earth, not rapt above the Pole, / More safe I Sing with mortal voice', he writes, before beseeching Urania: 'still govern thou my Song'.¹⁷ The Muse's voice does not simply give him the courage, and insight, to continue, but becomes a means of negotiating between the mortal and the divine.

Etymologically, inspiration is a breathing-in, but the cognates of *spiritus* nod back to its Greek precursor, enthusiasm: *en-theos* literally denotes taking in the God. The voice of the poet would in fact be a divine voice that speaks through the poet, who comes to resemble the fabled Oracle at Delphi: 'toxic gases rising from a chasm..., a frenzied or drugged Pythia talking incoherently, cleverly ambiguous prophecies and remarkable predictions that prophets or attendant bards expressed in dactylic hexameter.'¹⁸ Vocal possession involves both *ventriloquism* (the god/Muse speaking through the human) and a possession by *metre*--indeed, dactylic hexameter was employed in epic verse.

One might imagine that the ventriloquist model of poetic possession dates back to time immemorial. But in the Greek tradition at least, it was a relatively late development: according to E.R. Dodds, 'it is to Democritus [c. 460-370 BCE] ... that we must assign the rather doubtful credit of having introduced into literary theory this conception of the poet as a man set apart from common humanity by an abnormal inner experience, and of poetry as a revelation apart from reason and above reason.'¹⁹ The first extant stories of the Pythian priestess prophesying in ecstatic enthusiasm date from a

¹⁶ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 60 (I.24, I.26).

¹⁷ Milton, 390-91 (VII.23-24, VII.30).

¹⁸ Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations with a Catalogue of Responses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), xiv. Fontenrose's caricature is part of a lament that this cliché should persist, despite all the archaeological evidence that the oracle never existed in this form.

¹⁹ E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1951), 82. Ironically, for Milton the invocation of the Muse for inspiration allows him out of his isolation, and into a community of epic poets.

similar period.²⁰ The model of composition-through-inspiration was then deployed by Plato to undermine poetry's cultural supremacy: in the *Republic*, the poet's mode of composition demonstrates that they do not *know* what it is they tell; and in the *Ion* he argues that, because the rhapsode is possessed by the poem, they cannot be said to have any knowledge of the poem, let alone of what the poem speaks. Possession, that familiar trope in the post-Romantic ideology of the poet-genius, was at its inception weaponised in an ideological struggle *against* poetry, and most particularly against *poets* and the authority their poetic gift might confer.

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The intoxication of song is but one of many forms of possession at work within the *Phaedrus*. The first half of the dialogue revolves around three speeches, each on the subject of love: the first was composed by the rhetorician Lysias, but is read by Phaedrus himself; the second is Socrates' response, the third a 'palinode', or counter-song, by Socrates, correcting his earlier speech. The imaginary of possession reverberates throughout. As Socrates listens to Phaedrus read the speech of Lysias, he 'came to share the ecstasy of [Phaedrus'] enthusiasm' (234d): he comes to stand outside of himself (*ecstasis*), and partake in Phaedrus' own taking-in of the god (*en-theos*). When he gives his first speech, Socrates warns: 'I might become possessed by the Nymphs as my speech progresses. As it is I'm already more or less chanting dithyrambs' (238d), but by the end quips that 'I've stopped chanting dithyrambs and am now coming up with epic verse' (241e). Indeed, he believes that Phaedrus 'bewitched' him 'into being [his] mouthpiece' (242d): at once possession as ventriloquism, and possession by metre. In each instance,

²⁰ Fontenrose attributes this to Herodotos' story of Croesus, from the mid-5th century BCE (*The Delphic Oracle*, 111-13). As Steven Connor has observed, 'perhaps the real story is the depth of our own infatuation with the Delphic oracle, and by the fact that the myths surrounding the Delphic oracle should have lingered long enough even to continue to need refutation.' Connor, *Dumbstruck: A History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 49.

they would fit one of the central arguments of the *Phaedrus*: that in rhetoric speakers divest themselves of responsibility for their speech's content, sacrifice truth for what is pleasing to hear.

The third speech, the 'palinode', is the most complex. On the one hand, he claims it is spoken through him by the lyric poet Stesichorus (243e-244a). Stesichorus was reputedly blinded by Helen, just as Homer had been, for claiming that she eloped to Troy; unlike Homer, however, he composed a 'palinode' retracting the calumny, and promptly regained his sight. His palinode begins 'False is the tale I told'; and so does Socrates'. There is an element of ironic mockery here, at the expense of possession; yet Socrates' reason for composing the palinode is that he received a warning from his 'divine sign' (*daimon*): 'I seemed to hear a sudden voice telling me not to leave until I have purified myself from some offence or other which I have committed against the realm of the gods' (242c; it is this same 'divine sign' that Socrates will invoke in his defence oration, when on trial for corrupting the youth of Athens). More than this, in the palinode he offers a defence of love as *a form of divine possession*. His first speech had claimed that love leads to madness, and so should be avoided; but now he suggests that four kinds of madness are in fact beneficial: (1) the madness that leads to prophecy; (2) the madness arising from a historic family guilt that one needs to expiate; (3) the madness that leads to the composition of poetry; (4) love itself, in which the soul is possessed by beauty and thereby led towards true beauty, i.e. the eternal Forms. Possessed by a voice, Socrates rethinks possession.

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It is not only a speaker who can be possessed by a voice. When, in Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, Nathaniel first encounters the automaton Olympia in the flesh (as it were), she is singing at the harpsichord. Nathaniel is confronted with 'a voice like the sound of a

glass bell, clear and almost piercing', a voice 'whose fire penetrated his inmost soul.'²¹ In this he anticipates both hero and villain of Jules Verne's *The Castle of the Carpathians* (1893), one of the first novels to turn the recently developed auditory technologies into plot devices. Both had been captivated by the soprano La Stilla; the Count Franz of Telek had been betrothed to her, but during the final performance she gave before marrying him, she collapsed dead onstage, mid-aria, singing the fateful phrase *voglio morire* ('I wish to die').²² The evil Baron Gortz, inhabitant of the novel's eponymous castle, had watched her every performance during her lifetime, and was surreptitiously recording her when she died. Franz attempts to break into the castle, for he can hear La Stilla's voice resonate beyond its walls, and he thinks her in fact still alive and imprisoned therein. This voice is 'like a breath exhaling from her lips, which seemed to be motionless' (209). And indeed they are motionless: what he hears is in fact a phonograph recording of her final aria (220-21). As with Olympia, what makes La Stilla uncanny is precisely that there is a *voice without breath*.

Verne presents his novel as a demystification of archaic superstition. The local villagers are convinced that the eponymous castle is haunted; but, Verne's narrator reminds us, 'this story occurred in one of the last years of the nineteenth century', during which time 'the use of electricity, which is rightly considered "the soul of the universe", had just been finally perfected. The illustrious Edison and his disciples had completed their work' (194-95). When one of the villages announces, in the village inn, that he intends to visit the castle for himself and solve the question of its mysterious inhabitants, a voice warns him not to go, 'or misfortune will befall you!' (59), and when indeed it does, he admits that 'The voice did tell me harm would come my way!' (89). But it later transpires that this was the doing of a telephonic device: the reclusive Baron Gortz had

²¹ page ref.

²² Jules Verne, *The Castle in Transylvania* (Le Château des Carpathes) trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Melville House, 2010), 137.

had a wire installed in the taproom of the inn, to eavesdrop on conversations, and it was through this wire that the disembodied voice emanated with its uncanny warning.

Nevertheless, Verne cannot help but evince fascination at the mystique of voice. Not only is La Stilla's song, like that of Socrates' men-turned-cicadas, deathly; the phonograph, replacing the live performance with an infinitely repeatable one, becomes bound up in that death. As Gortz listens to his recording, he falls into 'a paroxysm of ecstasy' (once again: ec-stasis, outside-oneself); he 'breathed in this voice like a perfume, he drank it in like a divine liqueur' (209), in contrast to the breathless apparition from which the voice seems to emanate. But for Franz, this vocal performance 'could make the cords of memory vibrate most strongly in Franz's heart' (210).

The echo of the 'vocal cords' in 'cords of memory' intimates that the phonographic voice serves as an *aide-memoire*. This may well emerge from one of the uses to which the new invention was put: to record the voices of famous people before they died. Florence Nightingale's recording shows intense awareness of this: 'When I am no longer even a memory, just a name, I hope my voice may perpetuate the great work of my life.'²³ Those great inventors of auditory technologies, Thomas Edison and Guglielmo Marconi, were evidently themselves possessed by this imaginary of voice: both hoped to invent machines that would capture the voices of those already dead.²⁴ In the imaginary of voice, the phonograph both captures the voices of the dead, and brings death to the voice.²⁵

The imaginary of vocal memory finds a perhaps surprising analogue in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Aside its satire on the politics of accent, the play evinces a

²³ The transcript can be accessed online at publicdomainreview.org/collections/the-voice-of-florence-nightingale/. Last accessed 6 August 2017.

²⁴ See Jeffery Sconce, *Haunted Media* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2000), 82

²⁵ This is an ironic shift, insofar as Aristotle had argued that what distinguished voice from mere sound was indeed the presence of soul in the (not yet verbal) utterance Aristotle, *De anima* trans. J.A. Smith, in Richard McKeon ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 2001), 353-603 (II.8, 421a).

fascination with the phonograph and gramophone (Shaw treats the devices interchangeably). Henry Higgins, as befits one at the vanguard of phonetics, uses the phonograph for research purposes; yet it also conditions his relationship with Eliza. When she leaves him, the phonograph attains the same spectrality as in Verne's tale of suspense. When Higgins protests that he'll miss her, Eliza ripostes that he has the gramophone: 'When you feel lonely without me, you can turn the machine on.' Higgins then exclaims: 'I can't turn your soul on.' The musical version, *My Fair Lady*, contains a final reconciliation scene where Eliza returns, at the very moment that Higgins, lonely without her, is listening to her recorded voice. She replaces this recording with her living, ensouled voice. It seems that, for the musical at least, when one turns the voice on, the soul does return.

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The second 'myth' that Plato seems to have invented in the *Phaedrus* concerns the invention of a much earlier technology for recording voices: writing. The Egyptian god Thoth presents to King Thamous a new invention, a tool to notate speech, which he describes as 'a potion [*pharmakon*] for memory and intelligence' (274c ff.). Thamous is unimpressed: far from aiding memory, he argues, writing will 'atrophy' it (275a). It is this story that is so famously diagnosed by Derrida: when writing is called a *pharmakon*, the word is pointedly double-edged, at once a medicine to aid the memory, and a poison that will hasten its decay. Writing is a prosthetic of memory, but thereby takes memory out of the mind. But, Derrida argues, the stakes are higher than this: it is a question not just of memory (*mneme*), but of truth (*aletheia*). For truth is nothing other than 'living memory, of memory as psychic life in its self-presentation to itself.'²⁶ Such living memory, Derrida sees Plato to be saying, can only be preserved in speech, in the *logos*,

²⁶ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 105.

where the 'father' of the speech, the speaker, remains present in the act of speaking. The procedure of dialectic is nothing other than a means of bringing truth into the live memory of one's interlocutor. Writing, by contrast, cuts speaker off from their speech, and thereby effects 'the substitution of the mnemonic device for live memory, of the prosthesis for the organ.' Derrida continues: 'The boundary (between inside and outside, living and nonliving) separates not only speech from writing but also memory as an unveiling (re-)producing a presence from a re-memoration as the mere repetition of a monument; truth as distinct from its sign, being as distinct from types.'²⁷

Early in 'Plato's Pharmacy' Derrida had suggested that the 'incompatibility between the *written* and the *true* is clearly announced at the moment Socrates starts to recount the way in which men are carried out of themselves by pleasure, become absent from themselves, forget themselves and die in the thrill of song.'²⁸ He does not specify why this should be the case, yet the tropes he gleans from the myth--ec-stasis, absence, forgetting--foreshadow the threats posed by writing. Vocal excess, it would seem, as well as writing, must be contained by *logos*. The two myths complement one another insofar as each attempts to defend *logos*, one from the mouth that sings, the other from the hand that writes. But there is one further mnemonic prosthetic in the *Phaedrus*. Throughout, Socrates is possessed by *metre*.

In fact, voice complicates the binary logic around which Derrida's reading progresses. He understands the opposition of speech and writing to reinforce boundaries 'between inside and outside, living and nonliving', but voice is at once inside *and* outside, living *and* nonliving. In poem or speech we hear both the poet-rhetorician's voice and the voice that possesses the poet-rhetorician; both ventriloquism and impersonal metrical form (dithyrambs, dactylic hexameter). Derrida overlooks the

²⁷ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 108-09.

²⁸ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 68.

excesses and exteriorities of voice: not just its self-forgetting in song, but its remembering of something outside-of-self in verse.

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When in 1932 Milman Parry and Albert Lord documented the peripatetic oral bards of Southern Yugoslavia, it brought excitement that a modern Homer had been discovered. Parry went so far as to exclaim: 'When one hears the Southern Slavs sing their tales he has the overwhelming feeling that, in some way, he is hearing Homer.'²⁹ For, just as Parry had intuited about Homeric composition, the Serbian bards improvised as they composed, from a pre-existing store of formulae, which were deployed and redeployed in the act of performance. They were not 'poets' in the modern sense; nor rhapsodes, who memorise and perform another's poem. Rather, Parry and Lord called them 'singers', though contemporary terminology normally settles for 'minstrels' or 'bards'.

The 'formula' was Parry's great innovation as both classicist and ethnographer of oral poetics: 'a group of words which is regularly used under the same metrical conditions to express a given idea' (272)--'rosy-fingered dawn', 'the wine-dark sea', 'swift-footed Achilles' being some of the best known Homeric examples. These are not the same as a 'phrase repeated for the sake of its poetic thought or wording' (274); indeed, Parry argued, the formula serves less an aesthetic than a *mnemonic* function, organising the oral poet's thinking around metre and syntax to aid them as they compose in performance: 'The Singers found and kept those expression which without change, or with slight change, fall into that part of the hexameter which is determined by the role they play in the sentence' (307).

For Verne, Shaw, and their contemporaries, voice is indelibly linked with memory: the memory of the hearer. But for the bards of antiquity, voice itself was a

²⁹ Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse* ed. Adam Parry (Oxford: OUP, 1971), 378.

mnemonic tool, aided by the formula and metre. The prosthetic for vocal memory is not the phonograph but the formula. As Eric Havelock put it, 'epic's patron muse is indeed *Mnemosune*'.³⁰ When Plato deployed the motif of possession against the poets, it was precisely so as to establish dialectic as the place of 'true' memory, in which knowledge is present to itself. Whereas, Havelock argues, in *Mnemosune* 'is symbolised not just the memory considered as a mental phenomenon but rather the total act of reminding, recalling, memorising, and memorising, which is achieved in epic verse.' This 'total act' is far removed from 'verbatim' performance, and the very idea of 'verbatim' is itself, Walter Ong has suggested since, a creation of literate cultures: a feature of 'secondary orality' (orality in a literate culture), grounded in the certainties of Platonic epistemology.³¹

Yet Havelock also noted one way in which the analogy between the Serbian bard and Homer was not merely hyperbolic, but misleading. Yes, the composition of long verse narratives by Serbian bards proceeded along the lines Parry had identified in Homeric epic; however, the mnemotechnics of the formula was not simply a compositional practice for poetry, but a site of social memory, and even social reproduction. As Havelock puts it, this comparison 'lumps together two poetic situations which are entirely different, that of the Balkan peasantry and the Homeric governing class.'³² Bards held linguistic hegemony in the oral culture of Archaic Greece; in 1930s Yugoslavia, however, 'the central business of government and of social leadership ...

³⁰ Havelock, 91.

³¹ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 56ff. There is dispute on this question, however. Ruth Finnegan indicated forms of oral poetry which do appear to be subject to verbatim performance, notably Somali poetry. *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72-75. Of the Somali poets, F. Fiona Moolla puts it succinctly in her 'When Orature Becomes Literature: Somali Oral Poetry and Folktales in Somali Novels' (*Comparative Literature Studies* 49:3 (2012), 434-462): 'in the context of Somali poetry, it is not formulae that are memorized. Poems are memorized verbatim' (442). The Somali poems are lyrics, but often running to hundreds of lines, and with exceptionally complex rhythmic and alliterative structures.

³² Havelock, 93.

[had] for centuries been transacted in letters'. The poetry of their later Serbian counterparts took places at the margins of society; formulaic memorisation was no longer an affair of the state.

That voice might have an inherent power is hardly alien to us today: perhaps the classic example of the twentieth century is the Wizard of Oz--a little man hidden behind a screen employing a loudspeaker. But the bard's power was linked to *mneme* rather than vocal sound. Marcel Detienne notes that the bard, both by memorising and by making memorable, was able to determine what is saved from oblivion, from *Lethe*; their linguistic power gives them privileged access to *a-letheia*: truth. What is true, is what does not disappear; the bard's memorialising, both through their memorisation of the tradition and through the ritual performance of memory, makes them a 'master of truth'. But Detienne too notes that this is not simply a result of mnemonic capacity, but depends on their being a '[f]unctionary of sovereignty, or he who praises warrior nobility.'³³ On the one hand, the warrior caste retains its power thanks to the poets that praise it; on the other, the poets' social role can only continue because it serves the interests of the warrior caste.

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In a certain sense, then, writing--and with it, 'literature' as a category of 'writing'--killed the poets. But it also created 'the poet'--and even 'the poet's voice'. Until Parry, the 'Homeric question' had absorbed much Hellenic scholarship. Was Homer a single bard, or a composite? Friedrich August Wolf had argued that, given the impossibility of composing works of such length orally, and the discrepancy between the time that Homer was reputed to have lived (9th century BCE) and the transcription of the poems (c.650BCE), they must have been stitched together of loose songs and rhapsodies only

³³ Detienne, *Les Maîtres de vérité dans la grèce archaïque* (Paris: François Maspero, 1967), 27.

later brought into a single epic. But how then to explain the coherence of the narrative and compositional style? Parry's solution was that both epics were the production of an oral tradition, with the practice of composition-through-improvisation allowing the work to be passed down and elaborated over generations. The transcribed text contains centuries of linguistic development, notably blending Ionic and Aeolic Greek, implying that earlier formulae endured where the more recent dialect did not offer a substitute that fitted the metrical and syntactic requirements of composition: 'by no wilful choice, but by the constraint of his technique of verse-making, the singer keeps the formula though its language has become archaic.'³⁴ The poems were the creation of a tradition, and 'Homer', whether a historical individual or not, was himself the retroactive creation of this tradition.

Could we then, speak of Homer's 'voice'? Surely, the bard's 'voice' is more concrete than that of the poet who composes in writing. And yet, equally surely, only a single poet can have an identifiable 'voice', whether as physiological sound or as a metonym for authorship. The most recent edition of the *Princeton Encyclopædia of Poetry and Poetics* starts its entry on 'voice' with the warning: "To define *voice* in written poetry immediately poses a problem, for there is no literal voice in the poem: voice is an oral metaphor employed in the description and analysis of the written word."³⁵ But voice in the case of oral poetry seems to be no less a metaphor (or metonym). For here 'voice' would indicate collective authorship, something far removed from our imaginary of voice as marker of individuality. Mikhail Bakhtin's account of the 'monologism' of poetic voice is representative of our contemporary imaginary: poetry's monologism issues not just from the dominance of a single speaker (the 'lyric "I"'), but also from its rhythmic organisation, which 'destroys in embryo those social worlds of speech and of persons

³⁴ Parry, 332. See also 315.

³⁵ Roland Greene et. al, (eds.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1525.

that are potentially embedded in the word: in any case, rhythm puts definite limits on them, does not let them unfold or materialize.³⁶ This is far removed from the bard's 'voice', which is collective not simply in that composition is collective, but also insofar as it is guided in its compositional dynamics by collectively shared formulae, metre, and tropes. As Parry puts it, 'the style which [the bard] uses is not his at all: it is the creation of a long line of poets or even of an entire people.'³⁷ Modern rhythm is monologic, according to Bakhtin; but for these reasons, archaic rhythm would have been dialogism itself.

If lyric is today the dominant genre of poetry, and 'voice' its ideological sign,³⁸ then it is worth noting that, in the European tradition at least, lyrics seem to have been composed in writing from their inception: the technology of script allows for a release of vocal sounds beyond the functions of mnemonics, allowing also for divergences from a norm, syncopations, disparities between the abstract pattern and the individual poet (hence 'voice' as metonym for individual expression, or signature style). Parry's comparison between Homer and Pindar is illuminating in this regard: 'Pindar is moving alone in his own thought, choosing in a way that is his alone from the grand words of poetry ... Tradition gave him his artifices, but it did not give him his phrases. These he must choose.'³⁹ Pindaric odes are renowned for their metrical irregularity, which would interrupt both formula and memorisation. The written form leads to a more multifaceted metrical performance, and to the singular articulation of poetic identity, where individual 'choice' leads to a distinctive poetic 'voice'. The distinction here is not

³⁶ Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel' trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, in *The Dialogic Imagination* ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422, 298.

³⁷ Parry, 270. Again, the Somali context complicates this account. As Moolla says, 'Somali oral verse foregrounds composition by a creative, critical, verbally gifted artist more visibly than other African and global oral poetic traditions and perhaps in a way that compels one to readdress the assumptions held about these traditions' (446).

³⁸ cf. Paul de Man, 'Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory', in Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (eds.), *Lyric Poetry: Beyond the New Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 55-72; Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³⁹ Parry, 284.

between oral and written composition, however. Being blind, Milton himself composed orally: declaiming his verses to his daughters who acted as scribes. But this practice still depends writing as an available technology for storing the words, so Milton can compose a few lines a night, instead of improvising on the spot. From this blend of oral and written issues the notorious prosodic complexity of *Paradise Lost*. But already in the Pindaric form are set in motion many of the vocal motifs that, two and a half millennia later, would galvanise the development of free verse.

But it also signals the emergence of an additional 'voice', this one wholly *literary*: the reader's. As Eric Griffiths has argued, 'the intonational ambiguity of a written text may create a mute polyphony through which we see rather than hear alternative possible voicings, and are led by such vision to reflect on the inter-resonance of those voicings'.⁴⁰ Reading always entails a plurality of voicings. And as these possible voicings continually imply future soundings, the polyphony of reading, whilst 'mute', is continually registered in the lungs, glottis, tongue.

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With writing, voice starts to become extravagant, both as it signals the singularity of the author's 'voice', and in the literary work's hedonistic exploration of its vocal range. Such extravagance belongs both to voice as material, and to voice as imaginary. One might say, then, that it is *writing* that first conditions the imaginary of voice as excess; in subsequent material inscriptions of voice (wax cylinders, magnetic tape, mp3s) this has been repeated and intensified. Writing might, as Derrida contends, kill the self-present *logos*; but it unlocks energies and excesses in voice that such a *logos* would suppress. Literature, passing through its many aesthetic and technological transformations,

⁴⁰ Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 60.

continues tracks these energies, these excesses, and over millennia has used them to unfold a multifaceted, fragmented imaginary of voice.